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Dramatic Discourse under the Power of the Political Discourse – Mihail Davidoglu

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Abstract

A retrospective view of the dramatic works that define the first „revolutionary” decade allows the identification of certain composition patterns, of certain clichés which ideatically structure these plays which bare the clear marks of the ideological climate. Playwrights who shaped the age, being included in textbooks and becoming recommended models for the engagement in supporting social change fell into desuetude and were forgotten. What remains aesthetically valid in these creations?

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1. Introduction

The theatre of the first decade of “revolutionary” social changes has a repertory marked by propagandistic effusions, generating a series of plays which would become outdated due to the changes in the socio-cultural atmosphere and the aesthetic paradigm.

Teatrul / Theatre magazine, in its august 1957 issue, publishes a summary of the “Dezbaterilor asupra dramaturgiei originale” / Debates on original playwriting, from the Sinaia Seminar, as “Concluzii la dezbaterile pe grupe / Conclusions of the debate by groups”, presented in plenum as a final report by each of the moderators. The Sinaia Seminar debated on contemporary plays, illustrating the themes of the age, among which *Rețeta fericirii / The Recipe for Happiness* de Aurel Baranga, *Ziariștii / The Newspapermen* de Al. Mirodan, *Hanul de la*

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răscruce/ The Inn at the Crossroads de Horia Lovinescu sau *Cetatea de foc / The Citadel of Fire* de Mihail Davidoglu, starting from the “ideological and aesthetic analysis” [1].

An unrecognizable Laurențiu Fulga, presented the paper on Al. Mirodan’s debut play, remarking “the stringent actuality of the issues brought to attention by this dramatic work (...), the conflict generated by the retrograde forces (...), the most specific traits of the present communist man” (our translation). Mihnea Gheorghiu’s paper mirrored the debate on *Hanul de la răscruce / The Inn at the Crossroads*, “a play with a current theme (...), fighting was psychosis and the atomic hysteria” (our translation). The most interesting aspect of Mihnea Gheorghiu’s synthesis is the attempt to harmonize the demands of the communist present, that Horia Lovinescu had followed absolutely in *Citadela sfărâmată / The Crumbling Citadel*, 1955, with “the play of ideas (...), which lacks not the dramatic structure, but the depth of the drama, its psychological motivation, whence the impression of artifice, of laboratory production” (our translation).

A more interesting approach is that of the play *Cetatea de foc / The Citadel of Fire* by Mihail Davidoglu, who, in 1956, had presented the *Raportul asupra problemelor dramaturgiei/ The Report on the Problems of Theatre* [2]. In it, he mentioned that “theatre after the 23rd of August 1944 was built in the midst of social conflict (...), that the continuous fight led by the Party armed the playwrights with the understanding of social phenomena and it thus offered them the possibility to create true life images” (our translation). The central point of the report presented by Davidoglu was underlining the idea that there is an empty space in literature, in general, and in playwriting, in particular, and that is the insufficient knowledge of the worker, the peasant in our country. The fact that Mihail Davidoglu was chosen to present his report at the PRP Writers’ Congress shows that he was an important figure in the age who appeared obsessively in the analyses of the era, which registered the resounding successes of the new literature. There are studies indicating that the playwrights who, by embracing the new thematic inventory support the recommended realities, are visible in the newly created institutions. For example, in May 1948, by Decision no. 1578 of the Minister Octavian Livezeanu, Mihail Davidoglu was appointed member in the Reading Commission, together with Nina Cassian, Geo Dumitrescu, or Zaharia Stancu, who was also the Head of the Reading Commission and the Director of the National Theatre in Bucharest, while Aurel Baranga was the general inspector for the Theatre Directorate [3].

Cetatea de foc / The Citadel of Fire by Mihail Davidoglu, the subject of the paper presented by Andrei Băleanu in the Sinaia Seminar, had been written in the 50s and had been published in 1954 by the Editura de stat pentru literatură și artă / State Publishing House for Literature and Art. The author was known as playwright even before that changes that would bring him notoriety, since in 1947, his play *Omul din Ceatal / The Man from Ceatal*, had been performed at the National Theatre in Bucharest, with an extremely favourable review in a newspaper as *Liberalul / The Liberal*, of May 29th, 1947.

In the opening of the synthesis paper presented in Sinaia in 1957, there was a mention that “*The Citadel of Fire* provided a rich material for useful revisions and observations (...) discussions referring even to the playwright’s whole development” (our translation). Why would a re-reading/ reconsideration of the already well-known text have been necessary, if not so as to make “important observations on the weaknesses of the play” (our translation). Two sets of evaluations confronted each other in the body of the same summarizing text: on the one hand, praises to the playwright: “the speakers expressed their belief in the authenticity of M. Davidoglu’s talent. The virtues of the play *The Citadel of Fire*, were noted in the characterization of the characters, the exacting language of the author, in the ability to construct a play, to create dramatic moments” (our translation). Considering that “the frame of the play obeys the prerequisites” (our translation), the author of the paper mentions that “A lack of conviction was noticed in some of the moral tenets of the play, a lack of demonstrative capability in some of the attitudes and gestures too often sublime and not always sufficiently grounded in psychology, because of which the characters sometimes seem (...) dehumanized, to a certain extent, in implausible episodes. Criticism was also brought to the abuse of technicity in the dialogue of the play. Certain elements of ambiguity were also noticed, especially towards the end of the play, which result in fatigue and the impossibility to follow the play at ease” (our translation).

It is remarkable the decisive tone of the analysts on a text that, on the date of its stage adaptation, was considered “a true artistic event” (our translation), considered canonical since it “reflected some of the conflicts

specific to the age, because the great economic and political battles were seen through the eyes of characters with a well-established moral profile. The world of the mine and steel workers engaged in decisive battles had, in Davidoglu, the first playwright to understand their preoccupations, aspirations, hopes for the better” (our translation) [4].

In the conclusion of the presentation note, from the anthology published in 1964, Valeriu Rîpeanu considered that M. Davidoglu “wrote works well established in the history of Romanian theatre], which already questioned the author’s passing into oblivion” (our translation).

Closer to the destiny in time were, therefore, the commentators from the Sinaia Seminar, who had, probably, re-visited the text of the play *Cetatea de foc / The Citadel of Fire* in such a way, as to allow the reviewer to register some essential observations on the impact on a changing audience: “There was insistence on the thickness which overwhelms the audience” (our translation).

The conclusion of the debate is built in the note of the introduction into the substance of the play, in the sense that a part comprises negative aspects that would have conditioned the faults, and another part re-replaces the author in the position from which he had been taken down: “In observing the weaknesses of the play, it was demonstrated that the dramatic material, the life material, the author approached by documenting himself extensively at the site, living amidst the people, was not completely assimilated, crystallized, that, according to an expression, the author released the ideas while they were too raw, trying to comprise the current imperative in that moment and, for this reason, things appear sometimes unconvincing. Therefore, the resulting idea was that the author of *The Citadel of Fire* is a mature playwright, capable of constructing grand-scale actions and of bringing to the stage human characters with authentic passions and well-characterized” (our translation).

In a study entitled *Literatura oportunistă / Opportunistic Literature*, assessing that playwrights such as Al. Voitin or Mihail Davidoglu were “long credited conjuncturally” (our translation), Ion Simuț believes that “Nothing can be saved from the theatre of the first two decades” (our translation), because “Within theatre, schematism is just as devastating as in poetry. All the successes, the false successes of the age only reveal the dogmatism at play” (our translation) [5].

In its anniversary issue of August 1959, the above mentioned *Teatrul/ Theatre* magazine, while making an inventory, notes that “15 years after Liberation stand, for the dramatic art as well, as a historic route of deep, evolutionary transformations and victories” (our translation) making reference, in the editorial, to the great dramatic models: the work of the miners and steelworkers brought to the stage by Mihail Davidoglu, the revolutionary year of nationalization evoked by Lucia Demetrius’s *Cumpăna / The Scales*, the intellectual environment in *Ziaristii / The Newspapermen* by Mirodan [6].

A few pages below, in the same anniversary number, Davidoglu is mentioned once again, under the pen of the editorial board, for “the essence of the new man” (our translation), captured in the plays *Omul din Ceatal / The Man from Ceatal* and *Flăcăul din Ceanul Mare / The Lad from Ceanul Mare* [7].

With the front page notice “With this issue, our magazine closes the series of syntheses, significant moments, an image of this road, as it was reflected by the world of the theatre” (our translation), *Teatrul/ Theatre* magazine was bringing back into memory, after twenty years, under the signature of Trăian Șelmaru, the name of M. Davidoglu (and his fellow artists), with *Minerii / The Miners* and *Cetatea de foc / The Citadel of Fire*, important because “his protagonists, miners and steelworkers, are representative for the revolutionary impetus with which the great masses of the people, oppressed and exploited in the past, started, free and aware of the fact that power was in their hands, to build a new society” (our translation). The change in cultural paradigm was felt, because, in the same issue, Liviu Ciulei signed an article with a significant title “De la teatrul emoțiilor spontane, la teatrul de idei”/ “From the Theatre of Spontaneous Emotions to the Theatre of Ideas” [8].

It was the same year, 1964, when the anthology *Dramaturgia română contemporană/ Contemporary Romanian Theatre* was published, with the preface, chronological table, notes and content presentation signed by Valeriu Rîpeanu. The anthology selected nine plays, four belonging to playwrights who continued their activity after 1944, embracing the new social orientations, namely Alexandru Kirițescu, Victor Eftimiu, Camil Petrescu and Mircea Ștefănescu. Lucia Demetrius, Mihail Davidoglu, Al. Voitin, Aurel Baranga, Paul Everac or Al. Mirodan stood for “the Romanian plays that started to debate the moral issues specific to this age, characters with

a civil status and a moral structure previously unseen in our theatre. Mihail Davidoglu's play, *The Man from Ceatal*, 1947, is the first stage on the road to grounding our theatre in the complete socialist actuality. It will be followed by *The Citadel of Fire* and *The Miners* by the same author" (our translation) [9].

Presenting characteristic features of the "Romanian realist-socialist theatre in its starting years" (our translation), the author of the preface returns each time to Mihail Davidoglu's plays, where he identifies the protagonist's sentiment of social responsibility, the joy of attaining an ideal in life, the satisfaction of having contributed to the triumph of the new social settlements, of the communist ideas, determination, intransigence. None of the weaknesses of the play *Cetatea de foc / The Citadel of Fire*, which "Dezbaterile asupra dramaturgiei originale" / "The Debates on Original Playwriting", during the Sinaia Seminar, had underlined in 1957 exist in the 1964 approach. When, in 1978, V. Râpeanu publishes *O antologie a dramaturgiei românești (1944-1977) / An Anthology of Romanian Theatre (1944-1977)*, while M. Davidoglu was still living (he dies in 1987), he requests a word from the latter for the anthology, starting from the idea included in the preface that "M. Davidoglu's work identified so closely with the beginnings of our dramatic literature, that neither the critics, the historians, nor the public see it differently. It remained imbedded there, in the beginning period, in the heroic period, in the search period, built in the patterns of the age, patterns that that it seemed to forge for itself, thought in the dimensions and incrustated in the foundations of today's theatre" (our translation) [10].

In three successive issues of *Teatrul / Theatre* magazine, in 1983 [11], Ion Cristoiu published under the title *O posibilă istorie a literaturii dramatice contemporane. Mihail Davidoglu-de la Omul din Ceatal la Cetatea de foc / A Possible History of Contemporary Dramatic Literature. Mihail Davidoglu – from The Man from Ceatal to the Citadel of Fire*, an analysis of the spectacular affirmation of the playwright's work, wondering how one can account for the weak resistance to the test of time of plays such as *Minerii / The Miners* or *Cetatea de foc / The Citadel of Fire* considered true artistic-literary events at the time. Simultaneously, he aims to see whether there is a specificity to M. Davidoglu's talent that might have been sacrificed to the imperatives of the moment. The conclusion of the analyst is that the age would have determined Davidoglu, as well as other writers, to allow social conflict into their plays, even though he had no calling in this direction. The importance of Cristoiu's analysis resides in approaching the failure of the dramatic text in point of the patterns and clichés of composition and of ideas that the socio-political advances as a condition for the author to come into the limelight. It is also interesting, however, the viewpoint of the author, published in 1950, in full glory, under the title *Cetatea de foc. Realitatea, marele izvor de neînlocuit pentru creație / The Citadel of Fire. Reality - the Great, Irreplaceable Source of Creation*. Discussing the creative lab, Davidoglu, who had went for live documentation purposes to Reșița, drafts a portrait of the driven writer: "I have seen heroism that imagination could never have imagined. (...) The Party often brought to attention the decisive importance of the heavy industry for building socialism (...). Therefore, from all the themes that appealed to me, I thought I should write a play whose action takes place in Reșița, a play that would illustrate the fight of the working class and the efforts of the steelworkers and blast-furnace operators from Reșița. (...) On the other hand, I was engulfed in admiration reading about the heroic deeds of the workers and I felt I should write something in their honour" (our translation) [12].

In reality, by choosing to build a dramatic conflict around a thesis, Davidoglu embraces the prerequisites of the political conjuncture and, as the commentators from the Sinaia debate had observed in 1950, the play has faults that will condemn it to oblivion. Upon reading, the details of the working place, the description of the world of a steel plant, the abundance of technical terms, the protagonists and the counter-protagonists of a changing world, are as schematic and unconvincing, due to the fact that the problems of the working place blot out personal life, already barely sketched.

In 1971, when a dictionary is published, one "dedicated to the literary phenomenon of the last quarter of a century. A tribute to the 50 year anniversary of the Romanian Communist Party" (our translation), the author Marian Popa estimates that "a new world is corresponded by a new literature" (our translation) [13].

The introduction to the article about Mihail Davidoglu does not mean to deconstruct the myth; it builds a portrait on two levels: "M. D. represents, par excellence, the period of the revolutionary romanticism in the theatre and the heroic simplification of historic events. His theatre is rather political, that ideological, insofar as the propagandistic character is in the foreground. The industrial environment, new in our theatre, finds in him a

passionate and dynamic presenter, optimistic and without incertitudes. (...) Sacrifice becomes with M. D. the current means of demonstrating the abnegation to the ideas of socialism, and existence in production the only form of existence” (our translation).

However, considering that, at that time, Davidoglu was no longer set for the stage, the author of the dictionary takes some precautions, noting that: “In time, his theatre becomes more stereotypical, by leaving behind the favourable moment for exercising the function of sacrifice, after which heroism becomes bravado and gratuitous act (...). Gradually, the playwright exits the stage circuit” (our translation).

In 1975, the volume of studies entitled *Teatrul românesc contemporan. 1944-1974 / Contemporary Romanian Theatre. 1944-1974* is published under the aegis of the Academy of Social and Political Studies of the Socialist Republic of Romania, in which a study entitled *Relația individ-societate în drama socială / The Relation Between Individual and Society in Socialist Drama* and signed by Ana Maria Popescu, analyses the plays published between 1946-1956, emphasizing the aspects connected to dramatic construction, illustrated with frequent references to Davidoglu: “In a first stage, the playwrights, either out of the desire to express conclusively and explicitly the social conflict, its essence, or out of a superficial knowledge of the new realities, found it hard to depart from a certain structure; the conflict, its development, followed faithfully a structure that divided the world and the theatre in positive and negative characters with often identical reactions. Most of the plays published, staged in this period, hold, after years, only a documentary value, worthy of notice since it meant gaining the experience that made possible the later increase in artistic merit” (our translation) [14].

Ten years later, Mircea Ghițulescu, upon a new analytic encounter with the era, listed *Cetatea de foc / The Citadel of Fire* as “the most vulnerable, being fissured by propagandistic excesses” (our translation) and he situated the author “in a venerable anonymity” (our translation) [15].

Thus ended an era of theatre, one heavy with the commonplaces of propagandistic dedication.

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